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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 001376

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [YM](#) [DOMESTIC POLITICS](#)

SUBJECT: SALEH CELEBRATES UNIFICATION DAY ALA KIM JUNG IL

Classified By: Ambassador Thomas C. Krajewski for reasons 1.4 b and d.

1. (C) Summary. Ambassador along with twenty-five other foreign Ambassadors and thousands of other invited guests attended the 15th commemoration of Yemen's unification on May 22. In what turned out to be a remarkable and contentious decision, President Saleh held this year's festivities in the southern port city of Mukalla. Although a number of world leaders were invited, the highest-ranking officials in attendance were Arab League Secretary General Amr Musa and the Prime Minister of Djibouti. The ceremony, which involved speeches, songs, and thousands of colorfully dressed synchronized dancers, all praising Yemen's President and leader, caused many of our diplomatic colleagues and many local observers to comment on Saleh's increasing tendency to portray himself as the indispensable, wise leader in the run up to the 2006 presidential election. End Summary.

Coverage of President Bush's Letter

2. (U) President Bush's letter congratulating President Saleh on Unity Day was widely covered in the press and received top billing in official al-Thawra, above that of French President Chirac. In the receiving line prior to the ceremony, President Saleh expressed his personal thanks to Ambassador for President Bush's letter. Ambassador's op-ed piece on the importance of unification day also received wide, positive coverage.

Cult of Personality

3. (SBU) Since the beginning of May, sole broadcast outlet government-run Yemen TV has aired special reports with dogmatic rhetoric and extensive archival and current footage of President Saleh, highlighting his achievements as unifier and sole leader of the State. Saleh addressed the nation on Yemen TV the evening of May 21, followed by live coverage of the President driving his car and walking in downtown Mukalla being rushed by a 'spontaneous' crowd chanting "long life to Saleh."

4. (C) During the seaside celebration on May 22, 6000 young boys and girls danced and sang a song called "the great transformation" hailing Saleh as their wise leader. Observers were immediately reminded of North Korean parades as thousands of dancers dressed in color-synchronized costumes performed in honor of Saleh. Chinese and Syrian advisors reportedly choreographed the performance. In the grand finale a massive Yemeni flag with a giant superimposed image of Saleh was raised above the throng of multi-colored marchers as a huge yellow dirigible festooned with ribbons and another gigantic picture of Ali Abdullah waving to his people drifted behind the gathered masses. One observer remarked, wryly, "L'etat c'est Ali."

Opposition Parties Criticize Celebration

5. (U) In the style typical of the regional press, government and opposition papers alike carried pages of congratulatory messages to President Saleh and page sized picture of the President in patriotic poses, in addition to extensive coverage of the celebration. All political parties expressed good wishes to the Yemeni people. Two major opposition parties, however, used the occasion to criticize the ROYG as well. Islah commented that the party rejects using Unity Day to promote a one-party system, and the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) commented that the extravagant nature of the celebration was inappropriate given Yemen's dire economic conditions.

The Mukalla Controversy

6. (C) In the run up to the May 22 festivities, ROYG and opposition figures close to the Embassy discussed the controversial choice of the Mukalla venue. In a reportedly

spur of the moment decision, Saleh declared Mukalla as the site, over many ROYG officials objection due to the high costs of moving the entire government south due to infrastructure, security, and other logistical requirements. Several high level officials complained to Ambassador and other EmbOfs of a 300 Million USD price tag for moving the venue from the capital. (Comment: Although the cost was no doubt high, this number is exaggerated and likely includes multiple infrastructure development projects that were underway in Mukalla long before the decision to hold the ceremonies there. Nevertheless, the projected cost of the festivities became a rallying point for those critical of ROYG waste and corruption. End Comment).

Krajeski